Thompson Elementary School

220 Casa Grande
Houston, Texas 77060
Principal: Sara McClain

Aldine Independent School District's Thompson Elementary School enrolls approximately 720 kindergarten through fourth-grade students, primarily from economically disadvantaged families. Since 2005, the Texas Education Agency has rated Thompson as "Exemplary" based on its student proficiency on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Principal Sara McClain strives to maintain and foster a supportive environment for teachers' collaboration in examining student data and sharing strategies to improve instruction.

- ♦ Elementary (K–4)
- ♦ 89% Hispanic
- ♦ 9% Black
- ♦ 2% White
- ♦ 88% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

Establishing a Supportive and Nurturing Environment

Upon arriving at Thompson Elementary School in 1999, McClain saw a need to build a "culture of trust" among school staff. She met with grade-level faculty teams, listened to their ideas, and made sure they understood her goal of creating an open, collaborative environment. She continues to cultivate the culture of trust through professional development resources and supporting faculty in meeting schoolwide goals.

Teacher and administrator collaboration focuses on raising student achievement through sharing information and strategies to improve instruction. For example, a teacher who receives professional development on questioning strategies (e.g., framing higher-order questions) can share the strategies with other faculty members. Teachers then brainstorm together about using questioning strategies to improve student performance on the critical thinking portion of TAKS, an area identified as in need of improvement. The school also offers strong supports for teachers who need help. The principal maintains close communication with teachers and does her best to facilitate learning opportunities that increase instructional success. "[We] don't spend time pointing fingers," states McClain. "We need to make teachers know that we value them, and we want to build their capacity." She believes this culture of trust has had a positive impact on student achievement.

Using Data Together to Improve Instruction

Teachers and administrators engage a team approach in helping students succeed. Staff meets in various groups to examine student- and school-level data and determine the best plan of action for improving instruction and student achievement. The principal, assistant principal, skills specialists, and Response to Intervention (RtI) specialists meet biweekly to review recent schoolwide assessment data and determine professional development and other supports for teachers (e.g., additional time for collaboration or help from a skills specialist). Every six weeks, common planning time offers teachers an opportunity to collaboratively examine student benchmark data, discuss areas of improvement, and share successful teaching strategies. Additionally, skills specialists meet weekly with less experienced teachers to look at

data and work on improving instructional strategies. At the district level, principals meet every two weeks within district subdivisions (called "verticals") to assess their schools' progress and set goals for future growth.

The school uses a three-tiered approach to support students' academic needs. Students undergo universal screening in math and reading, which helps staff place students in the appropriate instructional tier. Students who achieve at grade level are designated as Tier 1 and do not need extra support. Those who score below grade level are placed into Tier 2 or Tier 3. Tier 2 offers additional supports to students achieving slightly below a benchmark, while Tier 3 provides intensive interventions for students achieving significantly below grade level. Staff also conducts diagnostic reading inventories to identify students who need accelerated reading instruction. Students with limited English proficiency take the Spanish version of a language proficiency assessment.

Staff enters student assessment data into a districtwide data warehouse, which teachers use to monitor student progress. This allows teachers to track the effectiveness of tiered interventions and accelerated reading instruction, provide sufficient support to English language learners, and ensure all students are achieving and making progress. For example, if a student placed in Tier 2 math intervention progresses to reach the benchmark level, he or she can be moved into Tier 1. The student is allowed continued growth, while the teacher is given more time to help the remaining students in Tier 2. Through continual progress monitoring, staff evaluates what is and is not working and make changes based on data.

The Early Intervention Team—consisting of the principal, assistant principal, skills specialists, RtI specialists, and other teachers—meets to examine data from teachers' rosters, universal screening, and progress monitoring. The team uses this information to determine whether student needs are being met. If the Early Intervention Team identifies areas for improvement, they plan and implement appropriate changes (e.g., additional intensive interventions for a student).

With administrator support, teachers collaborate to make decisions about helping students, determine content to reteach, and identify helpful professional development sessions. Teachers and administrators note that the culture of trust strengthens their work and contributes to an overall climate in which teachers and students can achieve greater levels of success.